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Learning to Communicate in Multi-Disciplinary Teams

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Introduction

Innovative clinical research is dependent on multi-disciplinary teams to envision, design and implement complex research protocols. The varied backgrounds and approaches can also cause culture clashes within a team, when team members from one field have trouble communicating with team members from other fields. Those culture clashes can cause more than frustrations; they can be a serious detriment to team function.

Effective team communication enhances team functioning and can strengthen team members' attachment and commitment to the team. Therefore, the goal of the presentation is to identify potential barriers to communication and team functioning and develop strategies for overcoming barriers and maximizing the benefits of a multi-disciplinary clinical research team.

Group dynamics and socialization

When considering group dynamics, keep in mind:

- A group has a separate life of its own
- A group has a structure of rules, roles and relations
- Groups assimilate new members through socialization

Teams don't become teams overnight. And new team members seldom automatically fit into the new team. New members become a part of the group through socialization.

Group socialization

1. Prospective member

    Entry

2. New member

    Acceptance

3. Full Member

    Divergence

4. Marginal member

    Exit

5. Ex-member

Being part of a multi-disciplinary team

Being a part of team means learning to make decisions together. Team involvement in decision-making can have a long-term impact on the team.

Perceived involvement in decision-making impacts:

- Perceived team cohesiveness
- Satisfaction with the team
- Satisfaction with team communication
- Desire to stay with the team
- Productiveness

Improving team communication is about more than just feeling good about your team, but can also have a direct impact on productivity. But the task can be even more challenging in a multi-disciplinary environment.

There are advantages and disadvantages to working in a multi-disciplinary team.

Advantages

- A wide range of ideas
- Question your assumptions
- Guard against Groupthink

Possible disadvantages

- Culture clash
- High potential for misunderstanding
- Divergent problem-solving and management styles

When managing multi-disciplinary teams, it is especially important to be aware of the environment in which the exchange of ideas takes place. Foster a supportive rather than defensive environment.

Supportive	Defensive
Description	Evaluation
Problem-Orientation	Control
Spontaneity	Strategy
Empathy	Neutrality
Equality	Superiority
Provisionalism	Certainty

How to make multi-disciplinary teams work

1. Overcoming barriers

- Disorganization
    - Ongoing conversations about team roles
    - Let roles evolve
- Miscommunication/ Misunderstanding
    - Improve listening skills
    - Learn from and about fellow team members
    - Reflective listening
- Lack of participation
    - Highlight individual strengths
    - Anticipate problems before they become problems
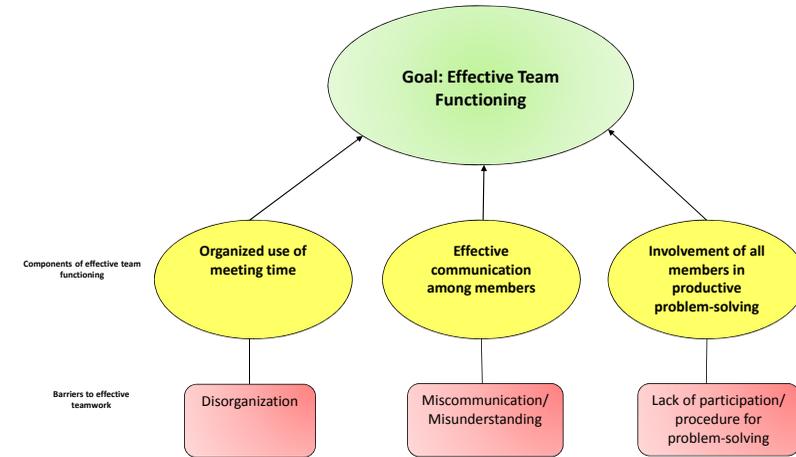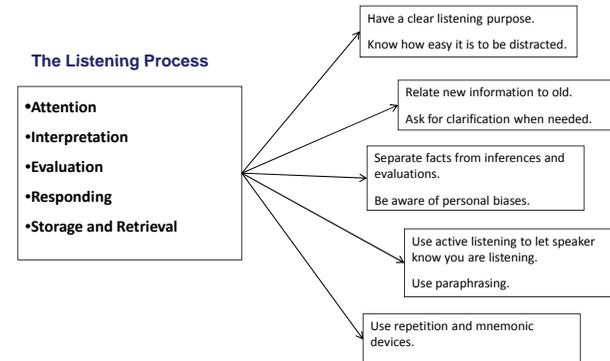

Graphic from Cooley, Elizabeth. 1994. Training an interdisciplinary team in communication and decision-making skills. Small Group Research, 24 (1) 5-25.

2. Improve the listening process

Hearing and listening are not the same thing.

Hearing is physiological. Listening is an active process of receiving, attending to and interpreting verbal and non-verbal messages.

Many workplace communication problems come down to a break in the listening process. Here are some steps to consider for both speakers and listeners.

The Listening Process

- **Attention**
- **Interpretation**
- **Evaluation**
- **Responding**
- **Storage and Retrieval**

- Have a clear listening purpose. Know how easy it is to be distracted.
- Relate new information to old. Ask for clarification when needed.
- Separate facts from inferences and evaluations. Be aware of personal biases.
- Use active listening to let speaker know you are listening. Use paraphrasing.
- Use repetition and mnemonic devices.

3. Encourage new ideas

When multiple disciplines are represented at the table, the possibilities of new ideas are endless. It is especially important to create an atmosphere where new and innovative ideas are encouraged.

When brainstorming, keep these principles in mind:

- Focus on quantity
- Withhold criticism
- Welcome unusual ideas
- Combine and improve ideas
- Make sure you have someone to write down all your ideas!